

Sewer fees increase to fund study

The proposed 10-cent increase would help pay for a 5-year study that will help find and correct sewage overflows.

By SABINE HIRSCHAUER | 247-4536

December 4, 2007

NEWPORT NEWS

— Newport News residents face a sewer fee increase next year — and possibly the next several years to come — to help pay \$6 million to \$8 million for a federally mandated study designed to find and correct sewer overflows.

Millions more would also need to be spent for regular repairs and upgrades.

As early as January, City Manager Randy Hildebrandt may recommend raising the current fee by at least 10 cents to help pay for the study, from \$1.53 per 100 cubic feet of consumed water to \$1.63.

Another 20-cent increase spread out over five years may have to pay for an estimated \$16.6 million in regular sewer repairs and updates that are proposed in the city's capital improvement plan.

"This would be above and beyond," the 10-cent increase, said Neil Morgan, the city's assistant city manager.

The \$16.6 million estimate could change based on results of the sewer study.

The U.S Environmental Protection Agency has been working since 2004 to crack down on cities and counties nationwide that have sewer overflow problems, causing waste to end up in the ground, creeks and rivers after heavy rains.

This fall, Newport News and 12 other cities, towns and counties that are part of the Hampton Roads Sanitation District had to enter into a consent order with the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality to study and check their sewer systems by December 2008.

Regionally, it's going to cost these localities, including Hampton, Poquoson, Suffolk, Williamsburg, Smithfield, and James City, Gloucester, Isle of Wight and York counties, a minimum \$50 million to pay for the studies, to monitor the sewer systems, and to do minor repairs, said John Carlock, deputy executive director of the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission.

The cost for larger sewer repairs, constructions or updates that may be recommended by the study isn't known, but it is expected to reach several hundred million dollars over the next 10 years, Carlock said.

"It's a significant amount of money, and they are trying to figure out where the money is coming from," he said.

The Hampton Roads Sanitation District treats an estimated 150 million gallons of waste a day and reported overflow accounts for a "minuscule" part of that, Carlock said.

The district worked on the consent order with the state and federal government for about two years.

Last month, the Newport News City Council took \$3.5 million from surplus funds to meet a first December 2008 deadline for the study.

"We had no choice (but) to find a source of funds to begin with the work immediately," Morgan said.

But Hildebrandt will return to the council in January or February to discuss alternative sources for the money.

"The most likely option is increasing the sewer user fee," Morgan said.

The \$16.6 million in general sewer repairs and updates already planned for the next five years will be adjusted based on the study's findings, said Everett Skipper, assistant director of the city's engineering department.

"When we do the study, we may identify additional or different projects that need to be addressed sooner," Skipper said.

Sewer overflows are rare in Newport News, Skipper said.

"We believe we already do a very good job with our sewer system. But we are part of the region that came under the consent order," he said.

But the city will still have to spend millions for the study.

"We might be told that we are in pretty good shape," Morgan said. "We can put a lot of sewer pipes in the ground for that kind of money. That's frustrating."

A rate increase will most likely go in effect either this spring or next fiscal year, which starts July 1, 2008.